

Saul the Sadducee? A Rabbinical Thought Experiment

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***Abstract:** In keeping with talmudic tradition, this article presents a rabbinical thought experiment that questions the authenticity—indeed the very historicity—of the Apostle Paul’s Pharisaic Jewish background. By examining current interpretations of Saul’s Damascus road conversion, as well as Lukan and Pauline accounts in the New Testament, it becomes evident that there exists a striking disparity between Paul and other first century Pharisees, particularly since he took far too many liberties with his beliefs and behaviors (pre- and post-conversion) that would have set him apart from his Pharisaic contemporaries. Moreover, Luke (a non-Jew writing in a post-Sadducean world) was both an unreliable biographer and yet the primary source for claiming Paul was a Pharisee. Thus, from a Jewish perspective, it is thought-provoking to ask whether the idea of Paul as originally a Sadducee best explains these disparities. Ultimately, the thesis of this article is that interpreters should not view Paul as having followed the standard path to becoming an authentic Pharisee. In fact, Paul’s radical revision of prevailing Pharisaic exegesis suggests he was likely never a Pharisee or, at the very least, not a consistent Pharisee in the tradition of Gamaliel. The purpose of this article is to trace just how modern scholarship would change if Pauline scholars presumed that Paul was, in fact, a Sadducee instead of a Pharisee. Undoubtedly, the consequence would suggest that both Paul and Luke were world-class (albeit opportunistic) rhetoricians who used Pharisaic imagery solely to add credibility to Paul’s image and his emerging influence on the primitive church.*

***Keywords:** Saul, Apostle Paul, Luke, Sadducee, Pharisee, Luke-Acts*

Introduction

IN A PREVIOUS ARTICLE, I suggested briefly that the pre-Damascus actions of Paul might fit better in the world of the Sadducees than that of the Pharisees.¹ From one perspective, the presence and status of first century Jews in the city of Tarsus, as well as the situation of the Jewish high priesthood under Rome during the life and times of Paul and the broader Roman relationship to Judea,

¹ Charles David Isbell, “Paul and Judaism,” *The Bible and Interpretation: New Testament* (2017), <http://www.bibleinterp.com/PDFs/isbellPaul.pdf>.

have created a wider canvas on which the New Testament (NT) understanding of these topics may be examined.² From another direction, NT scholarship distinguishes the representations of Luke and the personal testimony of Paul on a number of issues, such as the educational background of the apostle, the precise details about his Damascus road vision, his relationship to the city of Jerusalem, his quarrels with the Jerusalem church leadership (especially Peter), and his missionary methodology. In all such cases, one penetrating question faced by scholars remains that of the historical reliability of Acts in comparison to the writings of Paul himself (the *Hauptbriefe*). Answers to why these discrepancies exist generate a wide spectrum of scholarly opinion.

When modern NT scholarship turns to an analysis of the conversion of Saul, the one facet that is common to most theories is the conviction that the NT must be the starting point, but this “starting point” leads inexorably to two different approaches. Scholars rely either upon some (but not all) of Paul’s statements about the experience or upon some (but not all) of Luke’s later statements about Paul. Thus, the two different “ending points” that follow from these different starting points do not secure one single solution that is universally accepted. Rather, most theorists appear forced in their picking, choosing, and harmonizing NT passages where they often select some verses in support of a position only to admit that other verses conflict with their theory. For example, N. T. Wright contends that Luke’s account of Paul’s conversion necessarily contains some legendary accretions. Indeed, he suggests that the details in Luke are not fully trustworthy when compared to Paul’s own words.³

This past summer, Professor Troy Martin and I discussed the subject of Pauline scholarship, which he then provided a copy of his presentation paper, “Paul: From Persecutor to Apostle.”⁴ The paper summarizes virtually all the positions currently taken by NT scholars about the interpretation of the

² For a complete perspective on the massive archaeological efforts expended on the site, see Hetty Goldman, ed., *Excavations at Gözli Kule, Tarsus*, 3 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950–1963). For a political and intellectual analysis of Tarsus, see Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Image Books, 2004).

³ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (London: SPCK, 2003), 393.

⁴ Troy W. Martin, “Paul: From Persecutor to Apostle” (A Pastoral Ministry Institute Presentation in Recognition of the Year of St. Paul, Chicago, IL, October 16, 2008). Troy is a former graduate student of mine who has become a friend and respected colleague. This exchange about Paul was part of a broader discussion about numerous other NT issues, their impact on Jewish-Christian relations, and the differences in how Christians and Jews often read the same text.

conversion of Paul on the Damascus Road. The unpublished paper also provides a penetrating analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of these positions. As his citation of Lewis R. Rambo notes, “The literature on the conversion of Paul is a study in frustration.”⁵ The reason for such frustration is the fact that virtually none of the current explanations are able to account for all the NT details in a coherent manner. The result is often a recognition that Luke was more concerned with promoting a particular *theology* over against an historically accurate biography of Paul.⁶ However, while it is not an overstatement to note that current NT scholars disagree about numerous aspects of the Pauline and Lukan portrayals of Paul and his ministry, on one issue there is nearly unanimous agreement.⁷ Virtually all scholars take as bedrock the position that Paul practiced Judaism and was trained as a *Pharisee*, whether that training occurred in Tarsus or Jerusalem. It is the contention of this article that a Pharisaic interpretation of Paul’s life may require serious reappraisal.

Two things follow from this reassessment. First, the idea of resurrection was the essence of Paul’s preaching. Nevertheless, if scholars were to assume (for the sake of the thought experiment) that Saul’s original opposition to the Jesus movement was based on a Sadducean denial of resurrection, then Paul’s later insistence that it was Jesus (and no other) on the Damascus road may better explain why he joined the primitive church in the first place. Second, Paul’s conversion experience alone does not appear sufficient enough to explain why he would later oppose other Jews (even Jewish-Christians) by way of converting Gentiles. This article proposes that Paul’s revision of Israelite history in the book of Galatians may elucidate why Paul’s preaching in Damascus “baffled” his original Jewish audience.⁸ If what Paul wrote to the Galatians represents anything close to what he spoke in Damascus, it may well be that his preaching was received as nothing less than a radical revision of

⁵ Lewis R. Rambo, “Current Research on Religious Conversion,” *Religious Studies Review* 8, no. 2 (April 1982): 157, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-0922.1982.tb00221.x>.

⁶ Cf. Richard L. Jeske, “Luke and Paul on the Apostle Paul,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 4, no. 1 (1977): 28–38 and Richard A. Bondi, “Become Such as I Am: St. Paul in the Acts of the Apostles,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27, no. 4 (1997): 164–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/014610799702700405>.

⁷ Professor Martin uses the evocative phrase to describe the situation as “the maze of opinions and the divergent points of view” (Martin, “Paul: From Persecutor to Apostle”).

⁸ See also, the interaction with Adolf von Harnack in Armin Daniel Baum, “Paulinismen in den Missionsreden des lukanischen Paulus: zur inhaltlichen Authentizität der oratio recta in der Apostelgeschichte,” *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 82, no. 4 (2006): 405–36, <https://doi.org/10.2143/etl.82.4.2018920>.

standard Pharisaic doctrine, flying directly in the face of what Gamaliel and virtually all other Pharisees taught. Thus, Paul turning his attention to the Gentiles may have simply been in keeping with his Pauline practice of altering traditional Pharisaism.⁹ The result is that Luke's insistence on Paul's Pharisaic orthodoxy was hagiographic in nature, designed to defend Paul's legitimacy as Israel's new teacher.¹⁰ Indeed, Paul was the new Jesus.¹¹ This then leads to Paul's own self-description as a Pharisee.

“With Respect to Law,” a Sect or Legal Zeal?

Over the course of the past 150 years, scholarly portraits of the Pharisees have undergone multiple shifts and emphases, seen primarily in the movement away from uncritical acceptance of NT anti-Jewish polemical writings. But that is not to say a consensus about the Pharisees has emerged. The primary sources for the study of the Pharisees are still three: Josephus, the NT, and rabbinical writings.¹² The picture of “the Pharisees” painted in the NT Gospels and Acts suggests a tightly organized, monolithic, structured sectarian group with a specific theological and political ideology. The group is also assumed to have widespread religious influence and political clout. One might even say that the Gospels and Acts are obsessed with the Pharisees.

Of course, the published rabbinical writings derive from times later than the events being described in the Gospels. Overlooking this time gap, the result among earlier scholars was a failure to recognize one significant fact: “Talmudic stories which depict the Pharisees as rulers of society are later retrojections of 3d to 6th century rabbinic power onto the Pharisees of the 1st century.”¹³ Nonetheless, balance must still be sought. While it is true that the

⁹ Cf. James C. Miller, “The Jewish Context of Paul's Gentile Mission,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 58, no. 1 (2007): 101–15.

¹⁰ Jacob Jervell, “Paulus: der Lehrer Israels: zu den apologetischen Paulusreden in der Apostelgeschichte,” *Novum testamentum* 10, no. 2/3 (1968): 164–90, doi.org/10.2307/1560367; Reidar Hvalvik, “Paul as a Jewish Believer—According to the Book of Acts,” in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 121–53.

¹¹ Andrew Jacob Mattill, “Jesus-Paul Parallels and the Purpose of Luke-Acts: H. H. Evans Reconsidered,” *Novum testamentum* 17, no. 1 (1975): 15–46, doi.org/10.2307/1560195.

¹² The latter includes the Mishnah-Tosephta-Talmudim and even various early or medieval midrashic chrestomathies.

¹³ Anthony J. Saldarini, “Pharisees,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 5, *O–Sh* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 291. This is an excellent survey of contemporary scholarship on the Pharisees. Saldarini gives appropriate credit to the pioneering

written forms of rabbinic opinion are later than the written documents of the NT, it is important not to forget that the process of setting the Mishnah into written form early in the third century is more accurately perceived as an exercise in the *preservation* of earlier rabbinic discussions than a *creatio ex nihilo* of rabbinic ideas and positions. Nonetheless, even this small caveat does not alter the fact that a link between the *hakhamim* (rabbinic sages) of the Mishnah-Tosephta-Talmud and the “Pharisees” of the NT is unwarranted.¹⁴ The modern critical understanding of the Pharisees indicates that casual acceptance of Paul’s suggestion that he was originally a Pharisee needs to be reexamined, and some of the NT positions on Paul now call for reassessment. There are several reasons for such a revision.

First, in contrast to Luke’s repeated mention of Paul’s Pharisaic background, Paul himself used the term only once (Phil. 3:5). Of course, Paul was under no obligation to detail his Jewish heritage, but that is also the problem. Paul is portrayed as the master braggadocio who routinely bolstered his credentials in order to elevate his own status above his opponents.¹⁵ There is certainly a reason to ponder why the man self-described as the most scrupulous and observant Jew imaginable would not, more often in his letters, mention his Pharisaic history, particularly with Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Significantly, Paul failed to mention the one fact of which a Pharisee would have been most proud—his tutelage under Gamaliel—in his arguments against other Jews. In fact, in comparison to the *Hauptbriefe*, it is *Luke* (not Paul) who appears most determined to describe Paul as the quintessential Pharisee. But this only after the Sadducees were gone and the Pharisees assumed total power.

What is more, Philippians 3:5 has a very different “feel” than how the term is used elsewhere in the NT. Paul’s exact phrase is “*kata nomon*

analyses of Jacob Neusner and a short but valuable bibliography. It is also important to note that while Josephus and the NT Gospels are roughly contemporaneous, the two literary bodies derive from different cultures and evince different agendas and purposes. Thus, it is my judgement that Josephus is *emic* while the Gospels are *etic*. For more details, see Charles David Isbell, “Emic or Etic? Interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures,” *The Bible and Interpretation: Second Temple Judaism* (2015), <http://www.bibleinterp.com/PDFs/Isbell.pdf>.

¹⁴ This point is made succinctly by and undergirds the work of Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

¹⁵ Cf. Florian Wilk, “Ruhm coram Deo bei Paulus?,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 101, no. 1 (2010): 55–77, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zntw.2010.003> and Bondi, “Become Such as I Am,” 164–76.

Pharisaioi” (“with respect to law, a Pharisee”),¹⁶ or better, “methodologically pharisaic.”¹⁷ In other words, Paul did not assert that he was a member of an organized religio-political party; he simply said that his manner of legal exegesis was in line with Pharisaical methodology.¹⁸ Paul was zealous about obeying Jewish tradition (Gal. 1:14). Luke, who mentions Pharisees more than any other NT writer, does make a valiant effort to connect Paul with the Pharisees, but it is also Luke who describes Saul’s actions with Stephen (Acts 7:58) as the total opposite of the moderate Gamaliel, making Saul an inconsistent Pharisee.¹⁹ And it is Luke who links Paul directly with the Sadducean Caiaphas, describing Paul’s eager acceptance of an assignment from the High Priest and having him set out on his mission “breathing threat and murder” (9:1), a most un-Pharisaic attitude when compared to the wisdom of Gamaliel a short while earlier (5:34–39).²⁰

One important article by Jack Kent states, “Paul had a very deep psychological conflict about his persecution of the followers of Jesus,” and cites

¹⁶ This is an *anarthrous* phrase in Greek and does not yield “according to *the* Law” but only “with respect to law”; i.e. a hermeneutical method. I have argued previously that Paul’s methods of argumentation were not dissimilar to well-known rabbinical hermeneutical examples. However, the *conclusions* he drew from these methods were quite unique. See Charles David Isbell, *How Jews and Christians Interpret Their Sacred Texts: A Study in Transvaluation* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2014), 190–99.

¹⁷ The term itself may refer to a person who is “separate,” but it is not clear from what or from whom the Pharisee is separated (*parush*). In the active voice, the simple verbal root *parash* (*lifrosh*) means “to separate out” (i.e. to search for meaning by separating out individual elements of a verse or law), and does not refer to the person doing the searching as the one who is separated out from a community. The intensive *lefaresh* means “to explain” or “to interpret,” and yields the noun *perush* (“a commentary” obtained by this separation and interpretation), *parshan* (“a commentator” or “exegete”), *parshanut* (“exegesis” or “interpretation”), and *parashah* (“a portion,” i.e. a Torah portion to be read on Shabbat). All of this is based on the view that Pharisees accepted the validity of “Oral Torah” and also practiced a more progressive, free interpretation of the Written Law.

¹⁸ Gal. 1:15 is not a valid point to the contrary. Paul does describe himself as having been “set apart from the womb of my mother,” but notes that the self-revelation of Jesus to him was long after he had become an adult. He also links this divine calling directly to his calling to the Gentiles, an aspect of his ministry that begins sometime well after Damascus. At issue is what he was before this revelation and what made him so radically different after it occurred.

¹⁹ For the purpose of this thought experiment, it is here presumed that the Apostle Paul was, indeed, present at Stephen’s death.

²⁰ As is well known, violent nationalism was not uncommon among Second Temple Jews (e.g. 1 Macc. 2:24–28). Interestingly, Jerome appears to maintain a church tradition that Paul and his family came from the Galilean town of Gischala, which was rampant with Jewish nationalism in the first century (see *Vir. ill.* 5).

Acts 5:33–39 where the moderate Gamaliel advised caution about the treatment of Jesus’ followers.²¹ Kent also notes, “The Pharisees, represented by Gamaliel, saw nothing wrong in the teaching of the followers of Jesus,” and presumes, “Paul had changed and become a Sadducee courting and winning the support of the High Priest.”²² The difference between Gamaliel the Pharisee and Caiaphas the Sadducee is precisely the point. Gamaliel’s words of conciliation were offered *after* Saul had (presumably) participated in the stoning of Stephen, and there is no evidence that Paul was first a Pharisee who then “changed” into a Sadducee only to change back into a Pharisee after his conversion.

Second, Paul and Josephus appear to have been the only two people to self-identify as a “Pharisee.” Josephus was thoroughly at home in the Hebrew Scriptures, conversant with oral Torah, and an obvious Jerusalemite. However, with Paul’s repeated use of the Greek Septuagint (LXX) and Greco-Roman rhetoric, it is interesting to consider whether Paul was a diaspora Jew or a devoted Jerusalemite.²³ Had Paul been, in fact, a Sadducee, then his Greco-Roman leanings might make more sense than the idea that he was a Pharisee, a group known for their concentration in Jerusalem. Moreover, while Josephus observed that pious Jews maintained a negative view about learning languages other than Hebrew (*Ant.* 20.263–264), especially in connection with the study of Scripture, Paul consistently quoted the LXX of the Hebrew Scriptures rather than the Hebrew. In other words, Paul seemed to have an un-Pharisaic positive view of the Greek language.

Third, Paul’s supposed connection to Jerusalem is weak. The Lukan portrayal of Paul as residing in Jerusalem and (presumably) participating in the stoning of Stephen is hard to square with Paul’s written testimony to the Galatians decades earlier, insisting that he was totally independent of the church in Jerusalem and asserting that after his conversion, he was “still unknown by sight to the churches in Judea” (Gal. 1:22).²⁴ Further, immediately after his

²¹ Jack A. Kent, “The Psychological Origins of the Resurrection Myth,” *Faith and Freedom* 49 (1996): 5–22; quote on p. 16.

²² *Ibid.*, 17.

²³ The NT itself suggests Paul was born in the diaspora but was later educated in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3). Interestingly, Jerusalem was part of the tribe of Benjamin’s original territory (Judg. 1:21), the very tribe Paul claimed to descend from. For a defense of Paul’s Tarsus birth and Jerusalem upbringing, see Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 666–68 and W. C. van Unnik, *Tarsus or Jerusalem? The City of Paul’s Youth*, trans. George Ogg (London: Epworth Press, 1962).

²⁴ Except where noted, all translations of the Hebrew and NT Scriptures are mine.

conversion, Paul traveled to “Arabia” before returning to Damascus (1:17) rather than to Jerusalem. While it is still possible that Paul remained unknown or unaffiliated with the Jerusalem church (yet having still resided in the holy city prior to his conversion), it does appear odd for a Pharisee to have so little connection to his hometown of Jerusalem. Indeed, Paul’s own accounting indicates he did not step foot in Jerusalem for the first time after his conversion until three years later (1:18). With so little connection to Jerusalem, one wonders how Saul would have been traveling from Jerusalem with written authority from Caiaphas to hunt down non-observant Jews in Damascus or why Paul didn’t return to Jerusalem sooner if that was, in fact, his place of residence.

The fact remains that Luke was certain Saul and Caiaphas were on the intolerant side against the Jesus movement while Gamaliel was on the tolerant side. But Luke does not address the question of how in the first half of the first century, a Sadducean High Priest (Caiaphas) would have decided to trust a Pharisee to accomplish any task, no matter how trivial.²⁵ Moreover, Luke appears to presume that although Paul was a Pharisee, he for some reason supported the Sadducees in their execution of Stephen. But Luke does not tarry over the fact that such a stance would have commended Saul to Caiaphas, while it in no manner would have endeared him to his own esteemed teacher. If the Stephen death had occurred as Luke writes, one must wonder how Gamaliel could have advised the Sanhedrin not to respond to the Jesus movement in violence without referring to the fact that Stephen had already been killed with the approval of one of his own students. Of course, by the time of Luke’s writing, there were few (if any) Sadducees left alive. Could it be the Gospel writers presumed that anyone who opposed Paul must have been a Pharisee?

If Saul were a Sadducee, then...

The answers to these questions bend in a different direction if Saul were to be viewed as an elite diaspora Jew whose political ideology was closer to the pro-Roman policies of the Sadducees than to the interpretative methods of the Pharisees. Some Gospel-identified Pharisees supported or refused to oppose the Jesus movement, and numerous Gospel passages assert that some Pharisees

²⁵ Interestingly, even while observing Paul’s commitment to the Sadducean controlled Temple and assuming that Paul switched allegiance from Gamaliel to Caiaphas, Bruce Chilton does not abandon the speculative thesis that Paul was trained in Jerusalem by Gamaliel as a Pharisee. And he regrettably makes the false leap from a first century Pharisee to a second or third century “rabbi.” See Chilton, *Rabbi Paul*.

“believed” Jesus to be the Messiah. But not a single Sadducee is mentioned in the Gospels as believing in or even remaining neutral towards Jesus. And post-crucifixion, the party that had agreed with Rome, or perhaps had even been complicit in Jesus’ death (the Sadducees), would have had ample reason to oppose later fanatical followers of the Jesus movement.²⁶ Sadducees attempting to hold together their incestuous deal with Rome surely would have been concerned to note that the followers of Jesus were continuing to cause trouble because of their belief in the resurrection, an argument they already had with Jesus directly (Mark 12:18–27). But by the time of the composition of the Gospels and Acts, blaming such opposition on the vanquished Sadducees would have become meaningless. Only the Pharisees were still around, and virtually all Jewish opposition to Jesus and his followers could be attributed to them despite the fact that at least some Pharisees had become Jesus followers while not a single Sadducee is recorded to have joined the movement.

This is not simply an argument from silence. The Sadducees are mentioned pointedly and negatively in the Gospels, although Gary Porton is correct that the Gospel authors “did not have a clear idea of the differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”²⁷ In fact, surveys by modern scholars with access to rabbinic materials reveal numerous differences between the two, including not only resurrection but also laws of purity, belief in the “oral law,” and interpretations of Scripture. Still, the Sadducees are consistently portrayed negatively in the Gospels.

The cryptic note in Acts 6:7 that “a large number of priests were obedient to the faith” does not refute this assessment of the Sadducees. First, the variant reading “Jews” instead of *hiereôn* (“priests”) is attested in Codex 8. Second, it would be incorrect to state that Sadducean priests constituted “a large number.” Accordingly, the phrase may be understood as designating “ordinary priests who were socially and in other ways far removed from the wealthy chief-priestly families from which the main opposition to the Gospel came.”²⁸ Lower level functionaries who followed Pharisaical hermeneutics are more likely than elite Sadducees to have been led to convert to the Jesus movement.

²⁶ Note here the claim by Josephus that the decision of Pilate to condemn Jesus to the cross was a result of “indictment of the first ranking men among us” (*Ant.* 18.64). “First ranking men” almost certainly is a reference to the Sadducees.

²⁷ Gary G. Porton, “Sadducees,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 5, *O–Sh* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 892.

²⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 123.

But let us suppose for the sake of argument that the priests to which Acts 6:7 refers were in fact lower level Sadducees (if such levels in fact existed) and that Luke, writing at a time when Sadducees had been decimated, has alerted his readers to an earlier wave of Sadducean conversions. This could only mean that their conversion had come about after they had become convinced of their error about the resurrection. In such an unlikely case, their path of movement from anti-resurrection belief to acceptance of resurrection doctrine would appear quite similar to the path followed by Paul once he claimed to have encountered the risen Jesus. The point is that if Saul had been a Sadducee, his later preoccupation with resurrection would make a lot more sense.

Now, Luke describes opponents of Stephen bribing men to say that they had heard him speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and God” (Acts 6:10–12). And yet another accusation made against Stephen was that he had spoken against the Temple and Jewish law (6:13–14). But Luke is not describing a dispute over purity laws or Temple ritual procedure. At the time of the Stephen episode, the Temple still stood as *the* supreme Jewish religious symbol, and the place of worship still frequented by early Christian disciples themselves. By the time of Luke’s writing, the Temple no longer existed and his portrayal of Jews as having known that Stephen wished to have the Temple destroyed and its symbolic function replaced with Christian ideas is overly harsh and without basis.

On the other hand, Luke offers other undeniably clear explanations about the motivation of Jewish Temple authorities to oppose the new group: 1) Acts 4:1–2 indicates, “The Sadducees...were greatly disturbed because [Peter and John] were teaching the people and proclaiming the resurrection from the dead in the case of Jesus”; 2) “The Sadducees were filled with jealousy ...” (5:17), accusing the apostles of attempting to blame the death of Jesus on them (5:28); 3) Following the speech of Gamaliel, the Jewish authorities, identified in 5:17 as “the Sadducees” flogged the apostles and ordered them not to speak again “in the name of Jesus” (5:40). Disobeying that order, the apostles “kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus the Christ” (5:42). No word in any of these explanations about purity laws, rejection of oral Torah, or harshly literal Scriptural exegesis; 4) as for the Sanhedrin fight that Paul engendered between Pharisees and Sadducees in Acts 23, two points are significant. On the one hand, Paul was extremely deferential to Ananias the instant he was informed of his status as High Priest (23:5). On the other hand, either Saul the Sadducee or Paul the Pharisee surely would have known about the dissension between the two groups concerning the resurrection. The point was to break up the meeting, not

to identify with either side. And since the Sadducees were quite well known for their bellicosity, they were more likely to take the bait and start the fight.²⁹ The point is that Paul's behavior, both pre- and post-conversion, appear more in line with the aggressiveness of the Sadducees than that of the mild Pharisees.

Saul was a Pitiable Pharisee

For the most part, Luke's identification of Paul as a Pharisee has gone unchallenged. Professor Martin's summary furnishes an excellent mechanism from which to organize and examine each of the positions among current NT scholars about Saul's conversion. It helps in asking whether the identification of Paul as originally a Sadducee might offer a better hypothesis about his motivation and his ideological tendencies both pre- and post-conversion.³⁰

Paul is said to have "struggled with an acute inner sense of guilt and sin" and as a result, "As a Pharisaic Jew, he was keenly aware of his failure to keep the Jewish Law, and his guilty conscience eventually drove him to despair."³¹ Of course, the first point to notice is the confident description of Paul as "Pharisaic." But this statement fails to consider a basic feature of Pharisaic thought about the law. Contra the almost universal modern Christian understanding, no Pharisee expected that anyone would or could keep the whole of the law perfectly.³² But to the trained legal mind, a shortcoming of performance would not have been deemed sufficient to prompt a wholesale abandonment of law as suggested later in Paul's writings. Instead, a student of *torah* who fell short of adequate compliance to its statutes would have turned to the *torah* itself to find the remedy for those shortcomings.³³

²⁹ Josephus twice refers to the rudeness and argumentative nature of the Sadducees (*J.W.* 2:166; *Ant.* 8:16).

³⁰ Troy Martin is surely correct that "[Krister] Stendahl's challenge to the traditional understanding of Paul's conversion is so persuasive that Pauline scholars cease referring to Paul's experience as a conversion and prefer to see it as a prophetic call" (Martin, "Paul: From Persecutor to Apostle").

³¹ Martin, "Paul: From Persecutor to Apostle."

³² Hans Dieter Betz has championed the view that all of the precepts of *torah* were the minimum requirements necessary for a Jew to achieve "righteousness" (Hans Dieter Betz, "Paul," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 5, *O-Sh* [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 186–201).

³³ Note that the rabbis employed five different meanings for the word *torah*: individual statutes, the Pentateuch, the entire Hebrew Scriptures, "oral *torah*," and "life of *torah*." Paul appears quite unaware of the broader referential field of *torah* compared to the more limited focus of legal requirements as depicted in his use of the Greek *nomos*.

This highlights a telling feature of the Pauline understanding of “law.” Rendering Hebrew *torah* into Greek *nomos* produced not a linguistic equivalency but a difference in referential field that is staggering. “It is certainly no accident that νόμος is never used for the oral Torah or the teaching of [Jewish] tradition.”³⁴ The Greek term *nomos* has its own referential field that encompasses rules and regulations—to do or not to do, etc. But Hebrew *torah* is far broader. To cite only the most obvious example, the narratives of Genesis and Exodus would not appear on any law library bookshelf, but they are an essential part of *torah* because they “instruct” and inspire by example. Likewise, the Pentateuchal genealogies of “P” have no legal force. They could not fairly be called *nomos*, but they are “*torah*” because they instruct later generations about the origins and development of the people who had become Israel and Judah. Other kinds of literature form equally valid parts of *torah*, as well. And tellingly, the procedures to be followed when (not “if”) one falls short of perfect obedience to the law are what form an integral component of *torah* itself. Whatever Paul thought of *nomos*, it did not appear to encompass the *torah*’s own provisions for repentance, restoration, and reconciliation with God.

Four things would appear to be indicated. First, no one trained as a Pharisee would have been so completely unaware of the fluid functionality of “*torah*” in Jewish thought that the use of *nomos* would have been considered an adequate understanding of the idea. The most obvious example in this context comes from the works of Josephus, who was thoroughly conversant with “oral *torah*,” citing it frequently, sometimes in agreement and sometimes not. Another good example of the attitude of a first century Palestinian scholar to the gap between Greek and Hebrew usage and referential fields may be summarized by the grandson of ben-Sira. After moving from Palestine to Egypt to translate his grandfather’s textbook from Hebrew into Greek for Jewish students in Egypt, the grandson remarked, “The fact is that there is no equivalent for things originally written in Hebrew when it is a question of translating them into another language; what is more, the Law itself, the Prophets and the other books differ considerably in translation from what appears in the original text” (Sirach Prologue 21–26). By contrast, Paul simply does not engage with the

³⁴ Walter Gutbrod, “νόμος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 4:1059. And note that the lack of including “oral *torah*” via *nomos* would not have been a matter of concern to a Sadducee who did not accept “oral *torah*,” anyway.

broader sense of *torah*. He speaks, always and only, in the context of *nomos*, and the difference is striking.

The difficulty noted by the grandson of ben-Sira is not limited to the effort to translate Semitic Hebrew into Indo-European Greek; it is quite difficult to render any language properly into another. But the statement of the grandson signals the attitude that first century Palestinian Jews had about the relative significance and reliability of the Hebrew Scriptures vis-à-vis their translation into Greek. A Greek-speaking Paul would surely have been criticized by the grandson for his use of a language that differed “considerably in translation from what appears in the original text” of the Scriptures. In this regard, I am not aware of any other Pharisee of the era who was immersed in, and cited exclusively, the LXX. And the question of Hans Betz is exactly on point: “Is it conceivable that a pupil of Gamaliel displays no evident knowledge of Hebrew scripture, instead always citing the LXX?”³⁵

Again, a comparison with Josephus is instructive. Josephus was not a native user of Greek, and even notes his dependence on native speakers in composing some of his own work. His native language was Aramaic, and his mastery of Hebrew is demonstrable. But I find no evidence that Paul was anything but natively fluent in Greek. Had he been trained in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, it is difficult to imagine that he would have lacked thorough familiarity with the Hebrew text of the Bible, or that he would be dependent on the Greek translation of it. But knowledge of the Greek language and Greek philosophy would have been a given for a (Sadducean?) native of Tarsus.

Second, one actually conversant with “*torah*” would have been well aware of the provisions for responding to failure (“sin”), as noted above. Along with this, a Pharisee trained in the Hebrew Scriptures would surely have realized the repeated prophetic critique of the merely perfunctory repetition of rituals. The prophetic formulation began with Samuel: “Behold, to obey is better than a sacrifice, to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22). Subsequent prophets repeated and expanded on this concept (Amos 5:21–24; Isaiah 1:15–17, etc.), and virtually every other prophet in the Bible pointed to something far higher in importance than rote observance. Perhaps the most widely known formulation in this category comes from Micah 6:6–8, where the search for a life in accordance with divine requirements includes justice and humility but says not a word about keeping every picayune rule one might discover in a literal reading of the Torah. And the classic declaration of the Psalm 50:12–13

³⁵ Betz, “Paul,” 5:193. Three sentences later, Betz also notes, “It is almost impossible to establish any connections between Paul and the rabbinic sources.”

was also readily available to a scholar of Scripture: “Were I hungry, I would not tell you, for I own the entire world and everything in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of male goats?” So too was the well-known declaration of the following psalm attributed to David in tradition: “You [God] do not want me to bring sacrifices. You do not desire a burnt offering. True sacrifice to God is a broken spirit. A broken heart, O God, You will not spurn” (51:18–19).

Now, a Sadducee who did not know or acknowledge the prophets or the Psalms, on the other hand, might have reacted as Paul did. A person for whom “*nomos*” did not include the Prophets and the Writings might indeed have concluded that the only *nomian* way to fulfill the requirements of a seeker of righteousness was merely perfunctory and unrelated to the heart and the intentions. But it is impossible to believe that a Pharisaic scholar trained in Scripture (under Gamaliel!) would have made no mention of the true function and motivation for observing the manifold aspects of *torah*.

Third, had Paul been trained as a Pharisee, he surely would have compared the old remedies in *torah* to the new remedy in Jesus that he came to espouse. This appears to be what the author of the book of Hebrews attempted, as well as one possible reason why the early church deemed Paul to have been its supposed author. Of course, Paul did indeed realize that “the whole law” was fulfilled via the single word of love: “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10, see also Gal. 5:14). But in addition to accomplishing exactly what Paul says elsewhere is impossible, the idea that love alone, absent matching actions, is sufficient to any relationship is nonsensical. In these two passages, Paul himself admonishes his followers to “conduct ourselves properly” (13:13), and simply omits what he asserts elsewhere—the fact that no individual is capable of maintaining absolutely appropriate conduct every moment of life. Does this therefore mean that for Paul, non-Jews can fulfill “the entire law” via “love” even though their nature cannot completely avoid “quarreling and jealousy?”³⁶

Fourth, the statement of Betz that Gamaliel’s tolerance was at odds with standard Pharisaic attitudes of a slightly later era is strange.³⁷ To the contrary, within the NT itself, there are two examples of Palestinian Pharisees whose reaction to Jesus was even more positive than that of Luke’s Gamaliel. All of

³⁶ Hillel did indeed explain the entire Torah to a pagan who could stand on one foot throughout, but then pointedly added that the “commentary” on the law, the working out of the details in the reality of daily living, required a lifetime of study and devotion (*Shabbat* 31a). In sharp contrast with the teaching of Hillel, Paul’s dissatisfaction appears to be with Jewish law at its core, and his response was to create a new system that he found easier to follow.

³⁷ Betz, “Paul,” 5:193.

the Gospels agree that Joseph of Arimathea provided a respectful burial for Jesus in an effort to spare him the final indignity of continually hanging on the cross after his death. Even the frightfully negative author of John knew that Nicodemus, a high-ranking Pharisee, respectfully accepted Jesus as “a teacher who has come from God” (John 3:2) and later remonstrated with his brother Pharisees that Jesus should be treated fairly (7:51). Indeed, this Pharisee brought expensive myrrh and aloes to anoint the body of Jesus (19:39). In other words, it was not Gamaliel alone who acted in a tolerant fashion; other Pharisees did likewise. In sharp contrast, however, the pre-Damascus Saul not only withheld even an ounce of respect for Jesus, he also actively sought the destruction of his surviving disciples, a very un-Pharisaic thing to do. This naturally leads to a discussion of Paul’s deconversion from his so-called Pharisaic past, beginning first with the belief that he experienced a prophetic “call” on the Damascus road.

Paul’s Supposed Prophetic “Call”

The champion of this position was Krister Stendahl.³⁸ Troy’s discussion of Stendahl notes that his objection to the traditional understanding of Paul’s conversion changes the focus to the crucial yet overlooked fact that Paul was simply not laden with guilt.³⁹ On the contrary, as Paul’s own statements show, he quite boastfully stated confidence in his innocence during this pre-conversion period of his life, going so far as to declare himself “blameless” in Philippians and “a zealot” in Galatians. But here the pick and choose method betrays the attempt to describe Paul in a single manner. His boasting elsewhere to one side, Paul’s self-analysis in Romans 7 still remains. In other words, Paul’s almost Trumpian braggadocio as perhaps the greatest

³⁸ See Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *Harvard Theological Review* 56, no. 3 (1963): 199–215, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0017816000024779>.

³⁹ This, of course, overturns the clear wording in 1 Tim. 1:12–16, cited by Troy as “the traditional understanding of Paul’s conversion.” I do not view 1 Timothy as authentically Pauline, and the picture of Paul racked with guilt clashes with his own description of himself as “blameless” elsewhere. Yet, Sigurd Grindheim has argued that Paul understood himself to have been an apostate until his Damascus road encounter, which was Paul’s “coming to God.” This can hold true if one begins with the assumption that only when he came to Jesus did Paul come to God, that everything before this Christian vision was “dung” (Phil. 3:8). See Sigurd Grindheim, “Apostate Turned Prophet: Paul’s Prophetic Self-Understanding and Prophetic Hermeneutic with Special Reference to Galatians 3.10–12,” *New Testament Studies* 53, no. 4 (2007): 545–65, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0028688507000276>.

Jew who ever lived (cf. 1 Cor. 15:10) has to be balanced by his despair as a “wretched man” who simply could not live up to the standards of *torah*.⁴⁰ In both extremes, the most critical point made by Stendahl appears to stand: Paul’s Damascus experience does *not* inaugurate the worship of a new god. Instead, Paul appears to be a Yahwist both before and after his conversion. The most earnest attempt at comparing the Damascus narrative with prophetic call narratives from the Hebrew Bible comes from Karl Olav Sandnes, who concludes that Paul’s own conception of his apostolate was “his commission to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles in prophetic terms.”⁴¹

But is what happened to Saul consonant with a biblical call and commission narrative patterned on the experience of Moses? The answer has to be in the negative, and the pleadings of Sandnes do not make the case that Paul’s experience fits the biblical pattern of a call and commission narrative. To be sure, the double calling of his name (“Saul, Saul”) and his puzzlement about the speaker of the voice are reminiscent of the reaction of Moses to the burning bush in Exodus 3.⁴² But the difference is palpable. Whatever else he might have heard or thought about the life and teachings of Jesus, Saul had accepted the fact of his crucifixion as indisputable—Jesus was no longer alive. This alone explains his amazement. The voice speaking to him was not that of the God he was accustomed to worshipping. It was the voice of a man whom he believed to be deceased. But would this prophetic calling lead to evangelizing Gentiles?

No Hebrew prophet was called to preach to non-Jews, plain and simple. The Hebrew prophet was “called” to his own people, the community of Israel, never to an outside group. Regardless of his awareness of personal “sin” (as for example Isaiah acknowledges in 6:5), the Hebrew prophet did not seek to join a new religious tribe. Rather, he sought the restoration of his own community,

⁴⁰ E. P. Sanders has argued passionately against this “autobiographical explanation” of Paul’s presentation in Romans 7 (E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1983], 77–81). Robert Gundry has argued the other side of the question in Robert H. Gundry, “The Moral Frustration of Paul before His Conversion: Sexual Lust in Romans 7:7–25,” in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F. F. Bruce on His 70th Birthday*, ed. D. A. Hagner and M. J. Harris (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 228–45. Additionally, J. C. Beker argues that Paul was dissatisfied with Jewish law long before his conversion but did not realize it about himself until his encounter with Jesus (J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980]).

⁴¹ Karl Olav Sandnes, *Paul, One of the Prophets? A Contribution to the Apostle’s Self-Understanding*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.43 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), 240.

⁴² Also, Abraham in Gen. 22:11, Samuel in 1 Sam. 3:4, and Isaiah in Isa. 6.

their return to the traditional values their religious faith. In sharp contrast to the prophetic pattern, Saul's experiences within Judaism drove him to seek a new faith community where he could define a set of beliefs and actions to match his own beliefs. This, too, is different from a Hebrew prophet whose task was to insist that his people must revive the actions that had traditionally been accepted as necessary in relationship with God.

But an even more important point is made clear in Acts. No matter how often *Paul* testifies (or as Luke-Acts later claims) that he *immediately* obeyed his vision and accepted the commission as missionary to the Gentiles, the truth appears to be that *Saul's* immediate response to his vision was to preach in Jewish synagogues. Again, this is shown from both Paul himself and later from Luke. It is true that in his earliest NT letter, Paul's own explanation to the Galatians does specify that his calling was to preach "among the Gentiles" (Gal. 1:16), but multiple other passages from Paul and Luke argue that his initial ministry was to Jews in Damascus. If Saul had been sent to Damascus to arrest Jews who followed Jesus, it is difficult to imagine how, right from the start, he would have envisioned or located an audience of non-Jews in Damascus once he started playing for the other team. Saul would not have been dispatched to Damascus because every Jew there had already become a believer in Jesus, but because *some* Jews in Damascus had done so. Otherwise, his assignment would have meant that he was expecting to arrest the entire Jewish population. And since it was "Jews" who sought to harm Saul after his initial preaching, Jews who had *not* believed in Jesus must have constituted his first audience. In short, a *Gentile* ministry was not the first target of his calling. His non-Jewish focus developed over time and in light of his failure with Jewish audiences.

This exact structure is highlighted in Acts. Beginning in Damascus itself, after being healed by Ananias, receiving baptism, and spending several days with the disciples in Damascus, "Immediately (*eutheôs*) he began to preach in the synagogues" (Acts 9:20). In this account, Saul did not preach to a single Gentile during his tenure in Damascus. Instead, readers are assured, "he baffled the Jews" there (v. 22). As Saul's career advanced and took him to other locations, he repeated this initial pattern of preaching in synagogues first and then turning to a Gentile audience only after having failed in a local synagogue. When the church in Antioch was commanded by the "Holy Spirit" to "set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (13:2), the two men traveled to the island of Salamis and "proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews" (v. 5). Nothing is said about preaching to Gentiles until the notation that the Roman proconsul at the far end of the island in Paphos

“believed” because of his astonishment at Paul’s message (vv. 6–12). Their mission in Antioch began in synagogues in exactly the same way (v. 14). But when their second Shabbat sermons attracted such large crowds that “the Jews .. were filled with jealousy, blasphemed, and contradicted what was spoken by Paul” (v. 45), Saul (now being labeled “Paul” in the text) and Barnabas (now relegated to second billing) announced the following: “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you [Jews]. But because you reject it ... we are now turning to the Gentiles” (v. 46). Yet, even that experience did not bring about a change in pattern. “The same thing happened in Iconium” (14:1), Lystra, and Derbe (14:6). Likewise, Romans 11 underscores Paul’s feeling that only because Jews (“Israel”) rejected the Gospel was it possible for Gentiles to be offered a chance at salvation.

This is a far different picture from the simplistic explanation that sees Paul receiving his calling to the Gentiles at the same time he experienced a vision of Jesus. It may be correct to call Paul the missionary to the Gentiles, but his call to that task did not come en route to Damascus and it did not begin immediately in Damascus or even quite soon thereafter. From the outset, preaching to the Gentiles was clearly plan “B” after multiple failed sermons in multiple synagogues. To connect his call directly to his Damascus experience requires that both the report of his initial activities following his “call” and all of the repeated later descriptions of his missionary methodology be quashed.

Paul’s Re-Socialization

In Troy Martin’s words, “Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann provide the classic sociological definition of conversion as a transfer from one community to another.” Clearly, Paul could not simply be “called” to preach to a new, non-Jewish audience unless he himself managed to discover his own personal “re-socialization in a new community.” Such an understanding points to the failure of Stendahl’s attempt at restructuring the conversion debate simply by moving from a traditional “psychological” understanding to the “call” emphasis. Alan Segal’s perception that Paul simply moved from one form of Judaism (Pharisaical) to another (apocalyptic, mystical) is also surprising.⁴³ There is no evidence that any form of Judaism rejected *torah*, *kashrut*, Shabbat observance, and circumcision out of hand. However radically Saul’s experience changed him, its revelatory nature was not a burning awareness of the necessity

⁴³ Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

to preach to Gentiles. Instead, it was the discovery of the existence of a previously crucified-unto-death man named Jesus, a discovery that rendered the major concept of Sadducean Judaism obsolete. Whether any single word offers an adequate description of such an experience, it should be clear that whatever changes occurred in the thinking of Saul, they were not simply within Judaism. The radical insight into the reality of resurrection (triggered by the encounter with Jesus himself) was coupled with the repeated failure of his attempts to convince Jews of his point of view. These two factors worked together to produce a complete break with Judaism.

A Theological Definition of Paul's Conversion

It is Beverly Gaventa who prefers a theological definition of the Damascus experience, who contends simply that Paul's conversion meant he did not *reject* his past; he only *subjected* it to the inevitable belief that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah.⁴⁴ It is true that Luke's first version of Paul's activities in Damascus notes pointedly that Paul "confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the messiah" (Acts 9:22). But proving a messianic point to "the Jews" was surely not the kind of theological argument that would interest non-Jews. Paul himself says that God "was pleased to reveal his son to me" (Gal. 1:16). Of course, to a Jewish audience, being a "son of God" did not make one a messiah. Perhaps if the argument were that Paul became a single-minded ideologue after his experience, it might commend itself more. But a line of reasoning that goes from "son" to "messiah" to a resurrected deity falls squarely within the sphere of speculative philosophy, not theology.

Here is where Professor Martin's own summary is most useful, specifically his decision to "leave the literature on Paul behind" and "listen to Paul's own comments about his Damascus experience." For Martin, the authentically Pauline statements about the Damascus experience are Galatians 1:11–17; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8; and Philippians 3:4b–11. In each case, one fact must be considered. By the time Paul made these statements, even the earliest one in Galatians, his career had already progressed from infancy to that of a seasoned and experienced apostle. And by this time, Paul's career had become distinguished as a missionary to non-Jews. If Acts is allowed any credibility at all, this Gentile calling must be viewed not so much from Jesus

⁴⁴ See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament*, vol. 20, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986).

near Damascus, but from the Jewish leaders of the nascent Christian congregation in Jerusalem, which both Paul and Luke-Acts agree was determined well after the Damascus experience. The real question must be what Paul did in Arabia and Damascus before his mission to Gentiles. Who in either of these locales understood Paul's focus to be on converting Gentiles? The only record we have is that while non-believing Jews were baffled by Paul, the Jewish-Christians in Damascus still feared he had arrived to arrest them. It seems Paul's *initial* activity in Damascus was his argumentation against "Jews." Not a word indicates that Paul began Gentile evangelization "immediately." Martin is certainly correct to admit that "Paul's [own] account is rhetorically shaped ... by his reflections and experiences subsequent to the event itself."

Certainly, Martin is correct to note that in Galatians 1, "Paul closely connects his call of being the apostle to the Gentiles with this [Damascus] encounter." But this Galatians passage contains some problems, the first of which is Paul's insistence that he "advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age" and his linkage of that advancement to how "extremely zealous" he was "for the traditions of my fathers" (*ton patrikon mou paradoseon* in 1:14). Nevertheless, his claim about mastering "oral torah" is largely unsupported by the *Hauptebriefe*. Indeed, Paul does not self-identify as a Pharisee in this passage, and his claim that the reception of revelation directly from Jesus was for the purpose (*hina*) of qualifying him to preach among the Gentiles is belied by every other NT account of his initial messages in synagogues.

Martin's subsequent understanding of 1 Corinthians 9:1–2 is more to the point: "What is decisive and important for Paul is his vision of Jesus, and he recounts nothing else about the revelation." And "It is surprising that Paul's own statements are extraordinarily brief." But if the Gentile assignment had been key from the first moment of his Damascus experience, it is difficult to imagine a purpose for including in the NT all the details about his failed attempts among Jews. The primary hint appears to be to reinforce the idea that the Jews were obstinate apostates and that a "true" Jewish scholar, Paul, had the insight and legitimacy enough to become *the* teacher of God's chosen family.

From Damascus to Galatians

Before Saul's first public appearance after arriving in Damascus, still blinded by the great light of his heavenly vision, the Lukan narrative turns attention to what Ananias is reported to have been told by "the Lord" during his own vision. "I will show [Saul] what he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:16).

Now the suffering that Paul endured throughout his career as a consequence of his missionary endeavors came overwhelmingly from Jews who did not accept his message.⁴⁵ His first opposition came from non-believing Damascus Jews who were understandably “baffled” at Saul’s preaching (v. 23). And although later Christian Jews celebrated the change of Paul from persecutor to faithful preacher (Gal. 1:23), it appears that their initial reaction was to be “afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26). Overall, “the Jews” throughout Acts vied with “the Jews” in the Gospel of John as so totally opposed to Paul’s presentation of the Gospel that they were willing to go to extreme measures to destroy him.

It should not be deemed surprising that Damascene Jewish listeners were shocked at what they heard from Paul. They had been expecting an emissary from the High Priest himself to arrive with the authority to arrest Jewish Christians. Now, with no warning, they were hearing a totally different message. Who would not have wondered why the messenger had suddenly switched teams? Who would not wonder what had changed his mind? And who would not have wondered what authority had replaced the enlistment from Caiaphas to allow Saul to speak for the opposite side?

In this regard, E. P. Sanders has insisted, “The argument of Galatians 3 is against Christian missionaries, not against Judaism.”⁴⁶ But surely it is more precise to label Paul’s Galatian opponents as Jewish missionaries who were attempting to attract non-Jews into Jewish Christianity as they understood it. And it is certain that the first Jewish audience of the converted Saul in Damascus, the Jews who watched in amazement as he switched sides, were not Christian missionaries. They were ready to support Saul’s efforts to arrest the Christian Jews until they heard him preach, and then they were ready to kill him. Of course, Luke’s first narration of the Damascus experience offers scarcely a hint of what it was in the message of Saul that prompted such a reaction. The only information left in Luke’s account is that Saul’s suffering began almost immediately in the synagogues of Damascus when, as a consequence of a message that amazed (*ἐξίστημι*) and confounded (*συγχύνω*, a Hellenistic dialectical variant of *συγχέω*) the hearers, “the Jews plotted together to do away with him” (Acts 9:20–23).

⁴⁵ Gentiles in Philippi did beat and imprison Paul and Silas (Acts 16:19–24), but even their jailer quickly apologized, converted his entire household, and fed the two missionaries (vv. 25–34). In each similar case, trouble from Gentiles is followed by mass conversions and success.

⁴⁶ Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 19.

Again, according to Luke, Saul's message had made two points: Jesus is the son of God (Acts 9:20), and Jesus is the messiah (v. 22). These two simple points about sonship and messiahship should not have been controversial enough to prompt the extreme response of a death plot. By comparison, although Stephen had angered the Sanhedrin with his message indicting the Jewish people for having failed to obey their own law (7:53–54), it was not until they heard him claim to see Jesus alive and standing “at the right hand of God” (v. 56) that the members of the Sanhedrin (still dominated by the Sadducees at the time) “covered their ears, and yelling at the top of their voices, all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him” (vv. 57–58). But all Jews considered themselves children of God, and the great Gamaliel had reminded folks of two earlier messianic pretenders (5:35–39); and there is apparently no way to know what else Saul might have said in Damascus that would have evoked such a negative response. However, only a few years later than Saul's inaugural Damascus preaching, Paul's letter to the Galatians depicts a man who did not shy away from a knife fight. This is the letter to which Daniel Boyarin turns as the “hermeneutical key to Paul altogether.”⁴⁷ And it presents a message that Boyarin sees as evidence that Paul was seeking “the integration of gentiles into the People of God.”⁴⁸

Now at the outset, let me acknowledge that reviewers of the first draft of this article voiced strong disagreement with this aspect of my proposal, one noting that I am guilty of “a substantial misunderstanding of what Paul is saying” in Galatians, and another suggesting that I should read an article by Joseph A. Mindling⁴⁹ to discover how contemporary scholarship marshals the NT evidence that for Paul, his church membership was not an abandonment of his Jewish faith but a providential consummation of it. There is no denying that the NT turns the career of Paul into a climax with which the majority of current NT scholars agree. No less a NT authority than Raymond Brown recognizes this tendency, “In subsequent Christian history a sense of the sacredness of NT Scripture and respect for Paul as the great apostle have naturally led Christians to a conviction that his gospel was true to Christ and that of his adversaries was

⁴⁷ Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, 22.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 7. Boyarin, a noted Talmudic *ilui*, is anxious “to reclaim Paul as an important Jewish thinker” (p. 2), but does not note the fact that Paul's attempt to integrate gentiles into Judaism actually helped separate the two faiths.

⁴⁹ Joseph A. Mindling, “‘Are they Hebrews? So am I!’: The Jewish Side of the Apostle to the Gentiles,” *New Theology Review* 7 (1994): 6–17.

not.”⁵⁰ There is also no doubt that Paul thought he was correct in the way he understood Jewish law, and what some wish to understand as his heroic attempt to rescue Judaism from failure cannot be argued. But the issue at hand must be what it was about Saul in Damascus, and later Paul in Galatians, that led to such extremity on both sides. And the question is whether a trained Pharisee or an elitist Sadducee would have been more likely to participate in such an angry exchange about Jewish law.

On the one side of anger, traditional Damascus Jews whose team Saul had abandoned became angry enough to attempt murder. On the other side, Galatians stands as, “The most Pauline of the Pauline writings, the one in which *anger has caused Paul to say what he really thinks*.”⁵¹ Perhaps anger led Paul to resort to crudity. Perhaps his anger also contributed to “the crudeness of the polemic and the lack of nuance about the Jewish heritage.”⁵² But “there is no convincing reason for thinking that [Paul’s Galatian adversaries] were fools or dishonest.”⁵³ To the contrary, they may have believed that their interpretation was closer to the spirit in which Jesus was remembered for offering his take on *torah*: “Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). It is difficult to imagine a better introduction to the sermons of the Galatian opponents than these words of Matthew.⁵⁴

The issue is not whether one can find thoughts similar to Paul in some splinter group somewhere within the far corners of first century Judaism, but whether it is credible to imagine that anyone *trained as a Pharisee* would have reconstructed a central Scriptural narrative so radically. The point is that what Paul asserted in Galatians was not the standard Pharisaic view of Genesis and its relationship to the Exodus culminating at Sinai. Granted that he does this only in Galatians (that we know about), but he does it at least this once. Faced

⁵⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Abridged ed., ed. Marion L. Soards (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 169, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvggx32v>.

⁵¹ Ibid., 168, emphasis added.

⁵² Ibid.. Seven pages later, Brown underscores the fact that he is referencing Paul’s “unnuanced contention that the Sinai covenant brought about enslavement.” “Unnuanced” indeed! Still, far worse than Paul’s angry rhetoric is the fact that subsequent Christian history produced interpreters like Marcion, numerous patristic authors, and then Luther, John Wesley, and many others who rejoiced in what they read as Paul’s disdain for all things Jewish.

⁵³ Ibid., 170.

⁵⁴ The saying of Jesus continues to explain, “Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of the heavens” (Matt. 5:19).

with questions about his authority, challenged with a standard interpretation of Scripture that did not fit his mold, the Galatians polemic became Paul's reaction. Some of the details of the two incidents can be charted as follows:⁵⁵

	<i>Observant Jews in Damascus</i>	<i>Paul in Galatians</i>
<i>Questions</i>	Why have you suddenly switched sides?	Why have you switched to a new Gospel? (1:6)
	What changed your mind? Scripture? A vision of Jesus?	What changed your mind? An angel? False teachers? (1:8)
	By what authority do you now preach the opposite view?	Since I am the most advanced Jew of all (1:14), by what authority could any other teacher speak for Judaism?
<i>Result</i>	Damascus Jews "baffled."	"Foolish Galatians," "bewitched" (3:1); Paul "perplexed" (4:20)
<i>Tone</i>	Murderous intent	Crude mutilation

Now the broad issue of Paul and the law is one on which no scholarly consensus has been reached, and the narrower issue of Paul's response in Galatians is equally difficult.⁵⁶ Thus, Sanders observes that Paul must have had a clear reason for responding to the Galatians as he did, but adds, "There is no agreement among scholars as to what that reason was, and still less is there agreement as to how to understand the relationship of his numerous other statements about the law to the position which he took in the Galatian controversy."⁵⁷ As one example of the difficulty, Sanders notes the following, "The degree to which he could change the content of the law, while still saying that it should be kept, is strikingly clear in 1 Cor. 7:19, which I regard as one of the most amazing sentences that he ever wrote: 'Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but keeping the commandments of

⁵⁵ Does not the similarity of the two situations imply that Paul's response might have been similar? Would there have been anger and resentment, insults, curses, ridicule in Damascus? If so, would that not explain both the "bafflement" of the Damascus Jews as well as Paul's later clashes with multiple synagogues?

⁵⁶ Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

God.”⁵⁸ Elsewhere, Sanders comments, “Few moderns will be convinced that [Paul] ‘proves’ his case by quoting Gen. 15:6 and ignoring Gen. 17:9–14.”⁵⁹

Paul’s Break with Judaism

The linkage that I am suggesting between Damascus and Galatians is obviously hypothetical. But the similarity of the two situations does hint that Paul’s response might have been similar in both cases. Would there have been anger and resentment, insults, curses, crude mockery, and ridicule in Damascus? If so, would that not explain the “bafflement” of the Damascus Jews? But the Galatian evidence reveals more than merely Paul’s negative reaction to his opponents or his crude and intemperate speech in the process. To cinch his argument, he turns to a restatement of some of the most basic narratives in the whole of Scripture. Here is a parade example of what Sanders calls changing “the content of the law.”

In the final analysis, Paul’s break with Judaism was not centered in disagreement about sonship, messiahship, or even resurrection, three issues of far more interest to Jews than to non-Jews. As the letter to the Galatians makes abundantly clear, the specific point of Jewish law on which Paul focuses most sharply was circumcision. Granted that “circumcision” was a cipher for the keeping of the whole of Torah (Gal. 5:3), it was also the most obvious physical barrier standing in the way of non-Jews to whom Paul turned after having failed among Jews. But even as central as it was in Paul’s Galatians polemic, circumcision was far from the only thing, or even the most radical thing, that Paul seized upon in his effort to win the argument.

The purpose of this article is not to review or correct current NT scholarship on the manner in which Paul pursues his argument against circumcision and Jewish law in Galatians. NT scholars are quite correct to delineate Paul’s steps of argumentation and the way in which he uses the Abrahamic covenant as the earlier codicil that cannot be “corrected” by a later legal document. Thus, while I do not find it surprising that NT scholars

⁵⁸ Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, 103. In note 30 to this statement (p. 118), Sanders reminds readers that “Circumcision is directly commanded in Lev. 12:3.” Sanders is correct in denoting that this Pauline tendency shows the apostle’s willingness to “change the content of the law” whenever the argument required it. And it is certainly true that Paul was quick to depart from a “plain sense” reading of any passage on which he relied for his Christian interpretations.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

overwhelmingly view the Pauline materials differently from my own perspective, I also note that the Abrahamic covenant on which he relies is specifically about the absolute necessity of circumcision for all males. And here is the crucial point of emphasis in Genesis. This covenantal obligation applied not only for native Israelites but also to non-Israelites, either born outside the Abrahamic household or purchased from a non-native (Gen. 17:12–13). Certainly, Paul should be allowed to say that he disagreed with the plain teaching of the Abrahamic covenant. But that is not what he does. He simply asserts that the narrative does not mean what it says!⁶⁰ As noted just above, E. P. Sanders recognized this specific difficulty in the Pauline presentation. But the Genesis narrative does more than challenge Paul's reconstruction. By any fair reading, the Genesis narrative itself provides a pattern that might well have been seized by Paul's opponents, and Paul's *sensus plenior* argument may be his response to their *sensus literalis*⁶¹ viewpoint.⁶² But the Genesis text is clear: males born outside the household of Abraham as well as males acquired from other non-Israelite tribal families must be circumcised. Paul's Galatian opponents easily could have made a straight-line link from foreign born males in Genesis to first century Gentiles born outside the family of Israel seeking entrance into the Jewish family.⁶³

But Paul's choice of drawing Hagar into the mix appears to me to be egregious, and the eminent Raymond Brown, among others, expressed the same sentiment. It is curious that the four-century chronological chasm between the Sinaitic Torah and Abraham allowed Paul to dismiss completely any

⁶⁰ In the process, he has nothing to say about the first male to be circumcised, none other than Isaac, the forefather of freedom from circumcision as Paul would have it (Gen. 21:4).

⁶¹ This would correspond to the *peshat* or most natural explanation of a biblical verse based on its grammar, syntax, and context. The rabbis believed strongly that the *peshat* was the preferred sense. Note the rabbinic dictum, "A verse does not depart from its *peshat*" (*Shab.* 63a; *Yeb.* 13b; and *passim*). I have discussed the relationship between *peshat* and *drash*, a more intensive searching that often leads to an artificial deduction, in my work, Isbell, *How Jews and Christians Interpret Their Sacred Texts*, 65.

⁶² That Paul's Galatian opponents first used Genesis, forcing Paul to respond using the same text, is the claim made persuasively by C. K. Barrett, "The Allegory of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in the Argument of Galatians," in *Rechtfertigung*, ed. J. Friedrich, W. Pöhlmann, and P. Stuhlmacher (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1976), 1–16. Indeed, numerous NT scholars (perhaps a majority?) have adopted Barrett's thesis.

⁶³ This is a point that I have not seen addressed in discussions about Galatians.

significance of the law for Abraham.⁶⁴ But that same chronological chasm existed between Hagar and Sinai, and Paul had no hesitation in assigning to her the ultimate significance of the law. She was a slave. The law with which she is inextricably linked is therefore a law of slavery.⁶⁵

Nonetheless, what appears to be a non-negotiable point which Paul spins into his argument is his misappropriation of the order from Sarah to expel the handmaiden Hagar. Not surprisingly, in Paul's deft hands, an order from Sarah to Abraham concerning Ishmael becomes a parallel to the persecution suffered by Christians from Jewish slaves in the present moment. Here is where Paul's reliance on the LXX comes to the fore. Sarah demanded that Abraham expel Hagar just after observing Ishmael at play. The Hebrew text of Genesis does not include the name of Isaac in 21:9, but says only that "Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing." And the Hebrew text says nothing at all about Ishmael persecuting or harming Isaac. In fact, the Genesis text has it the other way around from what Paul derives from the story. In Genesis, the jealousy of Sarah leads her to treat two innocent victims, Hagar and her son Ishmael, quite badly.

But the LXX adds "with Isaac." Wayne Meeks has surveyed rabbinic *midrashim* that interpret the "playing with" Isaac by Ishmael as either mockery or even child molestation.⁶⁶ These texts are all quite late, and it is to be doubted that they were known early in the first century. That said, other midrashic explanations, also late, decided that Ishmael was vaunting himself and boasting about his future as the double-heir of the first-born son.⁶⁷ But in order for the analogy of Paul to work, he requires the *torah*-observant teachers of his day to be portrayed as persecutors of Paul and his Gentile converts. What must be noted is that if Paul's interpretation/analogy is followed, it is the Christian (Sarah) who persecutes the Jew (Hagar, the slave Jewess)!

⁶⁴ Paul apparently has no knowledge of the rabbinic dictum, *'eyn muqdam 'u-me'uhar ba-torah* ("there is no early or late in the Torah"); i.e. the narratives of the Bible are not always in correct chronological order.

⁶⁵ This is not to speak of the impossibility of using Hagar to symbolize both the Sinai covenant and the current city of Jerusalem. Here, Paul makes Hagar do what he boasted about doing himself—becoming "all things." In this instance, it was to help him win an argument.

⁶⁶ Wayne A. Meeks, "'And Rose Up to Play': Midrash and Paraenesis in 1 Corinthians 10:1–22," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 5, no. 16 (1982): 64–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064x8200501605>. The most pertinent examples are on pp. 69–70.

⁶⁷ See *Genesis Rabbah* 53:11.

These are among the reasons I cannot accept the argument that Paul was not rejecting Judaism, but simply arguing against specific teachers with whom he disagreed. These opponents of Paul were not Christian missionaries. They were Jews who according to the definitions set forth by Paul, were not in fact even Christian at all, an opinion stated unequivocally in Galatians 1:7 when he thunders that the message of his opponents “is really no Gospel at all.” He then describes that false Gospel as “perversion” and brings down a curse against its proponents. In order to win his argument against them, Paul finds it necessary to rewrite one of the most basic narratives in Scripture.

In my reading, the climax of Paul’s Galatians argument comes at 3:11, “Clearly no one [Jew *or* Gentile] is made righteous before God by law.” It also appears to me that this switch in Paul’s thinking must have occurred after he had come to believe that nothing within Judaism could possibly lead to righteousness. First, the resurrection of Jesus destroyed the basic pillar of the Sadducees, the one thing he had (presumably) cared deeply enough about to cause him to enlist in the service of Caiaphas.⁶⁸ Second, Paul’s personal decision to dismiss a basic narrative of the Jewish Scriptures destroyed any semblance of a “plain sense” reading of the text, and portrayed Judaism itself as stripped of its power for righteousness as long as it followed a standard interpretation of that narrative. Third, when his argument concluded by quoting Sarah in the radically new context he has contrived, the destruction was completed, “Expel the slave and her son, because the slave son shall not inherit along with the son of the free woman” (Gal 4:30, citing Gen. 21:10–12). This is not pharisaical hermeneutical methodology seeking a way to include non-Jews in the spiritual family of Judaism. It is a blunt declaration that there is no spiritual family within Judaism, only a clan of slaves.⁶⁹ Paul was doing more than calling his Galatian opponents slaves, he was labeling all of Judaism nothing but a slave organization. And he was calling for the installation of an entirely new system of faith to replace the system he had found impossible to follow, and whose members had rejected his radical revisionist message.

⁶⁸ Paul never linked his decision to jettison *kashrut*, circumcision, Shabbat, etc. specifically to Damascus.

⁶⁹ Thus, the Hebrew collective *zera* ‘ meaning multiple family descendants morphs into the Greek singular *sperma*, “who is Christ” (Gal. 3:16). Of course, when he needs to, Paul casually employs that same singular *sperma* in the collective sense to make his point about Gentile Galatians also being the “seed” of Abraham (v. 29).

Additional Questions and Observations

There is no single theory that covers the details of all NT treatments of the Damascus encounter of Saul with Jesus. But adding this experience to other factors contained in his extant correspondence does yield answers, some probable and others possible, as well as additional questions. First, the assumption that Paul had been truly “zealous for the traditions of [his] fathers” (Gal 1:14) from the outset should be questioned. Here the contrasting reports about the Jewish praxis of Paul and Peter should be considered. The case of Peter at Simon’s home portrays a practicing Jew who, invited to violate the laws of *kashrut*, puzzled over the meaning of the vision he was seeing and protested three times, “I have never eaten anything un-kosher or unclean” (Acts 10:14–16), before becoming convinced that this strict Jewish regimen of *kashrut* he had observed all his life could be set aside on divine authority. When reports reached Jerusalem about his ensuing journey to the house of Cornelius in Caesarea, other *torah*-observant Jews there had a similarly negative reaction and took issue (in 11:2–3) with Peter’s decision to eat with non-Jews (“uncircumcised men”). Only when Peter offered a detailed explanation of his heavenly vision did the entire group accept his divine ordination (vv. 1–18).

By contrast, the NT offers no hint that Paul agonized over jettisoning basic pillars of Judaism like *kashrut*, circumcision, or Shabbat observance in order to make his message less stringent for non-Jews. But while there is no comparable NT narrative describing Pauline reluctance to move away from Jewish praxis, Luke clearly describes his arrogance in presuming that he alone knew better than the ruling authorities in the Jerusalem church that the new faith should proceed without bothering to abide by the modest proposals detailed in Acts 15:28–29.⁷⁰ Then, in Galatians, Paul himself reveals a less than complimentary evaluation of the Jerusalem leaders and demanded that the changes he espoused had to be followed by all. If the difference between Paul and Peter (and other *torah*-observant Jews) is dismissed as merely an “argument from silence,” it surely qualifies as silence that is deafening.

⁷⁰ Given Paul’s preoccupation with circumcision, it should be noted that there is no NT teaching from Jesus advising that circumcision should be abandoned. So, Paul did not need to revise the clear meaning of the Abrahamic covenant just to make his point. He could simply have noted that since Jesus did not mention it, non-Jews should not be bound to it. Again, in the context of Mathew’s “Great Commission,” it must be asked how the apostles could make disciples of “all nations” without at least a brief explanation that the task would be possible because the stumbling-block of circumcision would be removed.

Second, Josephus was aware that members of various Jewish sects sought to punish their opponents, but he notes that compared to the Sadducees, the Pharisees were “not apt to be severe in punishments” (*Ant.* 13.294). If Paul’s affiliation with Gamaliel is retained stubbornly because Luke-Acts claims it, the question arises as to how such a moderate teacher should have produced not only a student ignorant of Hebrew and rabbinic thought, but also such a ferocious and violent extremist student. In an effort to address these and similar difficulties, N. T. Wright has argued that Paul might be viewed as a Shammaite Pharisee, setting him alongside Phineas and Elijah who used violence against Jewish traitors.⁷¹ Wright’s view is troubling. Paul’s crude outburst hoping that his opponents would “go the whole way and emasculate themselves” (Gal. 5:12) is a violent expression, but it does not compare with the actions of both Phineas and Elijah which cost the lives of non-Jews in addition to Israelites deemed improper worshippers of Yahweh. There is no hint that Shammai, famous for his *halakhic* differences with Hillel, ever considered violence against anyone as a proper response to a theological dispute. And the idea that the notoriously conservative Shammai would ever have moved to restrict *halakhic* norms like circumcision or *kashrut* does not strike me as credible.

Third, it has often been noted that Paul always cites the LXX and that most of his citations are paraphrases at best. Where is the evidence that he knew or cared about the *Hebrew* Scriptures or that he had even a cursory familiarity with “oral Torah” comparable to what we can observe in the writings of Josephus? Fourth, would a Sadducean high priest have authorized a zealous Pharisee to conduct a mission on his behalf? On the other hand, if Saul’s sympathies had been elitist and Sadducean all along rather than pharisaical, this would explain his initial willingness to participate in a campaign led by the Sadducean high priest against vocal proponents of resurrection.⁷² If Paul had been a Sadducee from the beginning, his opposition to a group that followed a dead leader whom they stubbornly insisted had been resurrected makes perfect sense. Here again, one is struck especially by the extreme and violent nature of Saul’s opposition that was so different from the attitude of the most famous Pharisee of his day with whom he supposedly had studied.

Fifth, the *purpose* of Paul’s conversion is still the subject of various NT interpretations. In addition to the Lukan accounts of the early missions of Paul and Barnabas summarized above, three accounts in Acts are specifically

⁷¹ N. T. Wright, “Paul, Arabia, and Elijah (Galatians 1: 17),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 4 (1996): 683–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3266349>.

⁷² Which Chilton notes he did with “all eagerness” (Chilton, *Rabbi Paul*, 46).

devoted to his Damascus experience (9:1–18; 22:1–16; 26:1–18).⁷³ All three link Paul's visionary episode with his sense of mission to Gentiles. Even despite this, the initial account in Acts 9 states that after he had regained his sight, "immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues" (9:20). Then the version offered in Acts 26 includes Paul's own conclusion, "After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. I preached first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, and throughout the countryside of Judea," but only then "also to the Gentiles" (26:19–20). It seems to me that here indeed was a man who could become "all things to all people," as circumstances shifted. I cannot imagine what someone might have thought if after hearing Saul trumpet his Judaism in a synagogue he would later hear Paul celebrate his freedom from everything Jewish in a church.

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⁷³ Gal. 1:16 makes the same claim, but less closely tied to the conversion experience itself.

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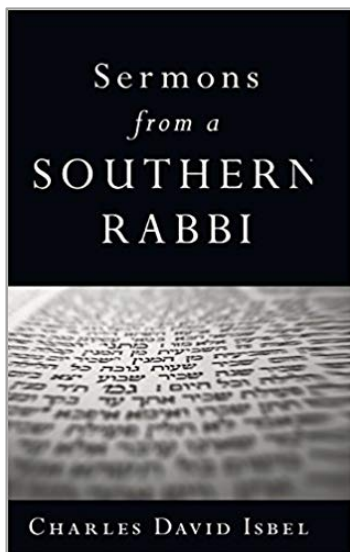
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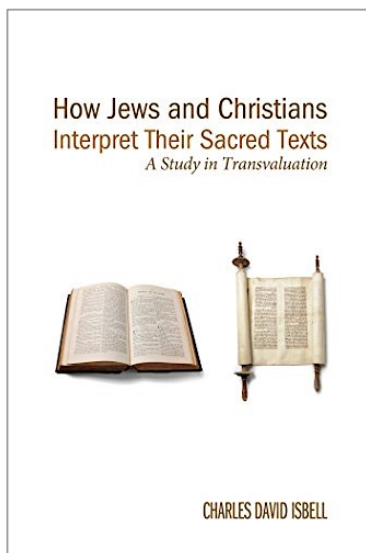
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